A socioculturally informed approach to scaffolding CALD students learning

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Abstract

Three mainstream Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers were recruited to participate in a socioculturally informed approach to scaffolding Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) students learning in a mainstream TAFE course using a structured approach to asking questions. Specifically, Marion Blanks (2002) Levels of Questioning was introduced to three TAFE teachers who were then asked to incorporate the questioning approach in their classes. Teachers were interviewed after a nine week intervention period and students were surveyed about their perceptions of the intervention in the classroom. The results of the study suggested the use of the levels of questioning supported the CALD students' potential to develop higher order thinking about topics presented in class.

The combination of a new learning context, new social context, and the processing of the language of study can play a significant role in the potential of CALD students to study and learn successfully. The concerns raised about international students coping with studying in Australia are consistent across a range of reports concerning second language learners (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2010; Bifuh-Ambe, 2009; Huang & Brown, 2009; Ramburuth&Tani, 2009). In an Australian setting, Ramburuth and Tani (2009) have found that international students reported that the expectations that teachers place on students to understand what is going on in the Australian classroom to be a major concern. These students reported problems in understanding the content, the expectations, and the procedures of the learning setting. For example, the students were concerned about when was copying from a text book plagiarism when and how do you ask for help, or support? In a similar study, Huang and Brown (2007) noted that students from other countries were often anxious and wanted to be successful, but did not feel supported. They also noted that language was a communication tool that "permeates all aspects of learning" (p. 184). Huang and Brown (2009) have shown differences in the way Chinese students perceived the classroom, and functioned within Australian adult classrooms. They reported that when Chinese students were not given opportunities to understand the contextual

nature of their learning, the students' learning potential and achievement were negatively affected.

Hay, Fielding-Barnsley and Taylor (2010) have investigated the use of Marion Blank's (2002) dialogue and questioning strategies with teachers to advance younger children's language acquisition and to advance the children's learning in the classroom. The issue for this current study is that although these strategies have been demonstrated to be effective in one educational context, early schooling, the extent to which they might be effective for facilitating TAFE teachers to accommodate CALD students more effectively in their classrooms, is unknown.

Method

Procedure

The study involved three TAFE teachers using Blank's (2002) Levels of Questioning as an intervention approach in their classrooms to enhance their students' ability to comprehend their instruction. The participant students were predominantly adult students where English, the language of instruction, was not their first language. The research question under review is: Does incorporating Blank's dialogue strategies enhance the learning of adult students where English is not their first language? Data were collected via teacher interview and student survey.

TAFE teachers interested in the study were provided with a training workshop directly addressing Blank's (2002) four Levels of Questioning: matching (Level 1); classification (Level 2); reorganisation (Level 3); and abstraction and inference (Level 4) (see Chapter 2, for further details). Discussion at the session included the importance of context in communicating and listening, and several practical activities were undertaken such as how different cultures and people interpreted the word "family". Depending on context people referred to different aspects of family such as extended families, and ages of children. These kinds of activities focused on using Blank's second level of questioning, classification, because teachers often move from Level 1 (Matching) to Level 4 (Abstraction) with little scaffolding or support between these levels.

Teachers explored the difficulties experienced by CALD students operating within complex classroom environments and the difficulty of acquiring understanding of context in a room of twenty or more students, especially when the social context of the classroom was unfamiliar. The teachers described their current teaching methods and the difficulties that some students had with the subjects they were teaching.

The teachers were asked to use Blank's (2002) Levels of Questioning in their classrooms, and to plan for this to happen. Specifically they were asked to use Level 2 (Classification) and Level 3 (Reorganisation) to build towards the aimed for Level 4 (Abstraction) understanding. To do this, the TAFE teachers were asked to make definitions explicit and have discussions about interpretations of the concepts used in the classroom. They were requested to classify words and concepts, such as disability, and to reorganise information, such as service continuum, by providing examples and giving students' opportunities to talk about these ideas.

Examples of using Blank's Levels of Questioning in the community services context were used at the professional learning workshop, especially aspects of

disability which provided some difficulty to the CALD students taking these classes. A particular example used involved cerebral palsy:

Level 1 Characteristics of the topic

- What are the characteristics of someone with cerebral palsy?

- Where do the words "cerebral palsy" come from?

- What may a person with cerebral palsy look like?

- How would a person with cerebral palsy speak and move?

Level 2 Comparison and contrast

- What are differences between having cerebral palsy and not having it?

- What are the problems that you would experience in your home if you had cerebral palsy?

Level 3 Reorganisation, person reflections, applying new knowledge

- Think about being in a wheel chair. How would you get in and out of your house or in and out of your bathroom? How would you do the cooking?

- What changes would you make to your kitchen cupboards?

Level 4 Higher order reasoning

- Why modify the home of someone who has cerebral palsy?

- Why is it important to do a home visit when designing a building modification plan for a person with cerebral palsy?

Participants

The study took place in a large metropolitan Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college in Australia. Participants were staff who taught international or migrant students in mainstream educational programs. Three experienced, post Year 12, TAFE teachers took part in the study. Each of these teachers had more than five years teaching experience and were well qualified. One teacher had a PhD, another had completed studies in teaching English as a Second Language and also held a Diploma of Training and Assessment. The third teacher was qualified as a TAFE teacher with a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. All three staff also had workplace experience in their area of teaching, which was community studies. Hence, all teachers had considerable experience and expertise in their own professional domains.

Four TAFE classes were involved in the study and all students were doing a Diploma in Community Services award course. The classes consisted of international CALD students, apart from one Australian student in one of the classes. Most students came from Mainland China, with others from India, Sri Lanka, and Korea. To gain entry to the Diploma level course, all students were required to have an International

English Language Testing System(IELTS) score of Level 5.5. Students holding this level of IELTS are described as "moderate users" of English (IELTS Institute, 2011).

Results

The results provided in the first section were from the interviews and email correspondence between participating teachers and the researcher. The student questionnaires are reported following the teacher findings.

Findings from teacher interviews and email correspondence

One teacher instructed one of her groups using Blank's Levels of Questioning for their first topic and applied her regular instructional approach to her other group. She reported that the group she used Blank's Levels of Questioning with were more able to understand the topic requirements than were the group that she used her regular method of instruction with. She also reported that for the other topics she used Blank's Levels of Questioning with both of her groups, and after using this dialogue approach with both groups she reported that there were similar outcomes for both groups.

Teachers reported back after the intervention, especially about their students' success on the TAFE assessment procedures that had been used in the units in the past. The key task was writing a report, which had created many difficulties for past students. Not only did students have to understand the specialist words used, they had to use these in meaningful ways to produce a document of a particular type, similar to what would be expected of them when qualified. Two of the three teachers reported that after using Blank's levels of dialogue as an intervention, the students' understood what was required of them to be able to complete assessment tasks successfully. They also stated that students asked questions of the teachers if they were not clear about what was required of them and observed that students were more motivated in class,

Teachers' perceptions about the language approach

The three teachers approached the use of Blank's levels of questioning in different ways and for the purpose of reporting the interviews that took place with the teachers they have been given pseudonyms; Mary, Rita, and Agnes.

Mary: Mary taught a class on "Domestic Violence". She was an experienced teacher who had been involved in career development undertaking courses in teaching of English as a Second Language and doing further studies in general teaching.

Mary stated in an email, "It should be noted at this stage that the unit that I am referring to is Domestic Violence. We must consider the depth and perhaps taboos this unit may conjure up". Mary went on to say "I am currently into the fourth week of the lessons and already I have found that there is a marked difference in the understanding of the assessment requirements and unit outlines from each group".

She went on to explain in more detail in an interview.

Students who are predominantly students from overseas and with one particular group I used the theory Blank's and in the other I did not. So I just went through and explained the unit outline and explained what the assessment would be, read through it, this is what we do, got the nod and they

said that this was okay… With the second group we dissected every word that was there like "compare" what does that mean and then we put it on the board and worked out what their opinion of "compare" was to what I wanted in the word "compare" and at the very end of that particular task the (group that used Blank) [showed] competency all the way. There was around five I think …that they did not understand what was being asked in the break-down of the task. So using that theory really when we scaffold and we would build on from that and look into it what their impression of the word is what it means to them

She described how she used Blank's approach and of the two groups she was teaching, the group that she used Blank's approach with were more prepared to ask questions about what was required of them. In an email, she wrote,

Group 1

I had a number of students asking me about the assessment tasks requirements as they would not [have an] understanding [of] questions that they had to answer.

Group 2

From this (using Blank's approach) the students were able to rephrase this question so that they had an understanding.

Rita: Rita also noted that there were changes in individual students. She went on to describe the change that occurred in a female Korean students. Rita said:

Let me tell you this though, this is the amazing thing, this is like, oh my goodness, there is this one girl in the class who hardly ever spoke, she wants to stay in Australia, but she didn't practice her English at all, so you go through classes when she didn't speak, and if she asked a question, she would look at somebody and somebody would answer for her and she would relay what they had said. (referring to the introduction of Blank's levels of dialogue) this girl is going to fail, to the top of the class, she went from being the bottom of the class and me thinking, this girl is going to fail, to the top of the class, and she was able to stand up and speak… she didn't hesitate to speak up in front of me…and I couldn't believe it. This girl who would go for weeks without speaking and she could actually…it was amazing, it was just amazing that she actually had this knowledge, but she was just terrified of speaking it in case she was wrong. That was just amazing, that just blew me away.

Agnes: Agnes described writing words on the board and then discussing them with the class. She said that her experience working with deaf people had assisted her in communicating with people of different backgrounds and commented that she found Blank's approach hard to implement in a classroom situation.

Student Questionnaire

Rasch analysis has been used to assess the Likert scale questionnaires used in this study. The measurement of data in this way provides information above the rank ordering of responses. Bond and Fox (2007) show how this type of count does not qualify as a real measurement of responses to items. Where a device asks for responses to items on a Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) merely counting the number circled does not warrant measurement (102). Bond and Fox have shown that the actual additive structure of the assessment tool cannot be clearly shown by just counting responses.

Figure 1 displays the item map for the Student Questionnaire. The right side of the vertical line shows each participant's level of endorsement and the left displays the relative position of the items on the logit scale.

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Logit
  3              +
                 |
                 |                       1.7   When I solve a problem in the class I usually look for a similar problem in a book and copy it
                 |                       1.8   When I solve a problem in the class I usually leave it until the teacher shows me how to do it
                 |                       1.2   When I solve a problem in class I usually have a go at the first thing that comes to my mind
                 |                       1.1   When I solve a problem in class I usually remember how I solved a similar problem in the past
                 |                       2.3   I found it easy to understand the ideas that were taught
              X  |                       2.5   I liked the way that the teacher asked questions
  2              +                       1.4   When I solve a problem in class I usually break the problem down into small steps
                 |                       1.6   When I solve a problem in the class I usually talk to other students about how to solve the problem
                 |                       2.1   I found it easy to understand what the teacher wanted me to do
                 |                       2.2   I usually understood what was expected of me
          XX T   |                       2.4   I enjoyed my learning experience in this class
                 |                       2.7   I asked questions to the teacher about the material
                 |                       1.3   When I solve a problem in the class I usually think carefully about the logical steps
                 |      1.7              2.6   I contributed to class discussion
  1      X S +  T 1.8                    1.5   When I solve problems in class I usually talk to my teacher about how to solve the problem
         X   |                           2.8   I feel more confident when I understand what I am doing
        XX   |
  XXXXXXXXX  |
      XXXX   |  S
       X M   |      1.2
     XXXXXX  |      1.1
       XXX   |
  0    XXXXX +  M  2.3  2.5
       XXX S |      1.4  1.6  2.1  2.2   2.4  2.7
         X   |      1.3  2.6
             |      1.5
         X   |  S
       X T   |
             |
             |
             |
 -1          |      2.8
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The pattern of the responses for the most easily endorsed items suggests students reported that they were asking questions of the teacher, using logical steps to develop responses, contributing to classroom discussion, and feeling confident about their understanding in the class that they took.

Summary of results

The reporting from teachers and students indicated that the intervention increased CALD students' willingness to participate in classroom questions and also to ask questions of the teacher. The teachers and students indicated that there was also an increase in the understanding of the work that they were required to complete. Huang and Brown, (2009) noted that CALD students are often reported as quiet and that they do not contribute to classroom discussions, or answer teachers' questions. Overall, the

responses to items from the Student Perceptions of the Learning Experience Questionnaire suggest a different pattern of classroom interaction to that often reported by teachers about CALD students' participation in western style classrooms and the questionnaire results support the teachers' observation.

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Problem-solving Questionnaire

Listed below are some statements concerning approaches to solving problems.
Please mark your level of agreement with each statement.

1) When I solve problems in the classroom I usually

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	remember how I solved a similar problem in the past	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2	just have a go at the first thing that comes to mind	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3	think carefully about the logical steps	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4	break the problem down into small parts	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5	talk to my teacher about how to solve the problem	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6	talk to other students about how to solve the problem	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7	look for a similar problem in a book and copy it	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8	leave it until my teacher shows me how to do it	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2) Listed below are some statements about how you found learning in your recent class.
Please mark your level of agreement with each statement.

In the class I have taken recently, I

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	found it easy to understand what the teacher wanted me to do	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2	usually understood what was expected of me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3	found it easy to understand the ideas that were taught	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4	enjoyed my learning experience in this class	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5	liked the way that the teacher asked questions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6	contributed to classroom discussions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7	asked questions of the teacher about the material	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8	Feel more confident when I understand what I am doing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐